

\write\mailer
November 29, 1995

Memcon: Norman Mailer

His main message: The one thing I can tell you, that I have some competence about, is how you keep it going; what Henry James called, "the keeping up."

Someone who is highly articulate like yourself has a tendency to believe that writing will be easier than it will really turn out to be.

Writing is like playing the piano (!)...it takes years before you're really good. It may be easier for you...you've written before,...[he doesn't mean this]

You've got to make a death-commitment (!). You've got to put your ass on a chair, and sit there at a regular time, (whether anything is coming or not); whether you feel flat, no ideas. (he now writes two to four hours a day, but it usually takes him an hour to get started.

What does getting started mean? The usual: staring at the wall, sharpening pencils... Answering phones, paying bills? No, no. I have a studio where I go with no phone in it. You're not serious if you're working in a place with a phone. That's hopeless; even if you don't answer it, you're wondering who called. [TURN OFF PHONE--IN OTHER ROOM?]

You make this commitment with your unconscious; a commitment to be there, to work. If you miss your appointment, your unconscious is like an aggrieved wife: "Where were you? I was waiting..."

You've left the troops standing out in the rain.

Your unconscious doesn't care about your morality or your politics; it cares about your fidelity to it. If you're reliable, it will start to anticipate a week ahead of time, or two weeks ahead. That's what keeps you going. What you're going to do the next day...

You should try to do this for at least two weeks, or a month, to get started: before you conclude, this method isn't for me.

Go cold turkey. You've got to decide that this book is more important than other pleasures. Movies? If you're going to write at night, than no movies at night. in the afternoon, if you have to. But better to make the experiment: do without. [that would apply to newspapers, above all, and to unrelated reading. lunches. "Monastic life."

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On advance: you'd be better off if you can get as much done as possible before you go to a publisher. If you had half a book...you'd get a much bigger advance, than just on a proposal. Likewise for movie rights, options: the more done the better. Thus, (hbe responds favorably to the idea of a grant, that would take me through first part, unlike agents)

Seven days a week? No; sometimes he's done two days writing, one day off (!). If you're going to take a day off, tell yourself (your unconscious) that in advance. The important thing is to keep your appointments to work. And, yes, it could be a good idea to start with a heavy stint: 6-7 days a week, several weeks (now), to get started.

"Do you sail? Well, there's a sailing term: it's important to keep headway, not to be dead in the water. Momentum."

Wives: it's a real problem. It's very boring to be around someone writing....If she loves you enough, and realizes this is really important to you...

"I've never had to write a proposal." (But he's written reliably, finished...)If you had written quite a bit, you wouldn't have to write a proposal...

Writing at night or in the day? Don't try to change your habits; if you're used to writing at night...(but that is adapted to deadline pressure...) Don't treat this as a deadline; make it a 9-5 job (whether those hours or not). Regularity. (Like Robert, at night).

He says: call him anytime, call him in a couple of weeks to let him know how it's going. "Call me Doc." (I tell him of how I decided to get a Ph.D.,,so as not to have to address the question of whether or not to correct generals who called me Dr. Ellsberg. (There's also the story of "Dr. Ellsberg" in the courtroom. The prosecutor; the judge. And Carol: Are you a real doctor? Are you the Dr. Ellsberg?) I tell him of the piano; "So that's why you don't like discipline." But actually, I'm used to it; and it wasn't the practicing I minded.

Is it really good, or bad, for me to think of it as piano? (What's worst is to think of publishing as a recital; especially, to do so unconsciously. Maybe I could reframe that. Or maybe, if it's conscious...)

Old problem: after momentum for two weeks, three weeks, a month: Pat would schedule a vacation, a trip, time together. At the moment, I face Christmas,

"When I heard you at Wellfleet, you were so articulate...you can

write...

(If I can come to write as I speak...tell the story...tell a story...each day, each week: as Obst said, a program, bite-size pieces, week-size pieces...)

This way of doing it, Mailer discovered 10 or 15 years into it. It used to be, he would have a good day, then...get drunk that night...lose days. Lectures...give up...they take days to recover from...

Caffeine? Just enough, if you need it. I've taken so much coffee I thought....my hands would freeze up/...

Questions for Mailer:

Should/must it be the same time every day?

A minimum period? A set period?

Must it be: on memoir?

Must it be "writing, memoir" or can it be: outlining, setting goals...(if not, when do I do that? In evening? Wh

When do I do reading for the memoir?

What of other reading?

Is it that: if one writes during the morning: then other stuff is done during the afternoon or evening; or, if one writes in the evening, then during the day?

Should I really not try to make it a daytime job? Or, especially if I'm alone in Washington, should I exploit being alone by doing it when it comes most naturally to me: which is probably at night? (He implied the latter).

Does he (not) use a computer? Any aids, programs? How does he (now) use secretarial assistance?

How about using the early, just-after-waking creativity...even before eating? (Certainly, before reading a paper. I really must break that habit. As BT says: my reward, later). Both BT and Allen Smith mentioned that they used to keep a tape recorder by them at night, for thoughts just before going to sleep (AS) or during the night: to transcribe in the morning. (I should get a transcriber).

I start that tonight. Along with, tomorrow morning:

PERSONAL STATEMENT

For the last quarter of a century--since I left government work in 1970, having just given the Pentagon Papers to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for which I expected to go to prison for the rest of my life--I have worked continuously to help create and to participate in mass movements to change U.S. foreign policy with respect to nuclear weapons and to intervention.

I have worked actively in many areas of this overall movement, from public education--via lectures (five hundred or more), courses, teach-ins and rallies and countless media interviews--to lobbying Congress and the executive branch, innumerable (and endless) organizational meetings of non-governmental organizations, and encouraging and participating in campaigns and individual actions of non-violent civil disobedience (leading to more meetings and discussions, in courthouses and in jails).

At any given time in those 25 years I have tried to support and work with virtually every organization and coalition in sight that was addressing these issues, rather than to be identified with one particular organization. (For most of that period my income came almost entirely from public lecturing; in the last seven or eight years, primarily from grants. But throughout the period most of my speaking--probably 80% of it or more--has been donated free to the groups who invited me).

For the last three years I have been based at Physicians for Social Responsibility in Washington, which has administered grants awarded jointly to me and to PSR (to which I was formally listed as a consultant) for Manhattan Project II. I initiated and directed MP-II, with the goal of undoing, as far and as fast as possible, the legacy of the original Manhattan Project, which created the first atomic bombs in three years half a century earlier.

My immediate goal was to coordinate the concrete objectives of as wide a group as possible of anti-nuclear and peace activist and lobbying organizations toward an agreed agenda and rough schedule for nuclear disarmament, and then to take part in coordinated grassroots and lobbying pressure on the Administration to adopt these priorities. More than 40 organizations supported the agenda proposed by MP-II, and the Campaign for the Non-Proliferation Treaty, a coalition of more than a dozen major organizations for which I served on the Steering Committee, adopted the MP-II agenda almost verbatim as the basis for its lobbying activity.

During this, for me, unusually long immersion in "inside the Beltway" organizational and lobbying activity, however, I kept my own perspective that both national-level lobbying and media work and nation-wide and international grassroots activism, including direct action, are essential to our cause, and I have done my best not only to encourage both but to participate in both kinds of

involvement, and to encourage their close coordination. Thus, while participating as a member of the CNPT in lobbying delegates to the Non-Proliferation Treaty Renewal Conference in April-May 1995 at the UN, I also organized (with my wife and with the Reverend William Sloane Coffin) a Fast for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, achieving commitments from a very wide collection of well-known religious figures and peace activists to fast for one day or more during the NPT Renewal Conference, in order to focus attention on the goal of abolition and on the moral urgency of the issues being addressed. I myself fasted on water for the full 26 days of the conference, while carrying on a heavy schedule of meetings, lobbying and interviews.

That was tiring (especially afterwards, when renewed eating stops the flow of adrenaline!), but the organization of a worldwide Abolition Caucus during the conference has brought new energy, to me and to many others, as did the opportunity to take part in the observances in Hiroshima and Nagasaki of the 50th anniversaries of the first nuclear bombings. Since then, activities encouraging a boycott of French products to protest their continued nuclear testing (I have given four interviews in the last couple of weeks) have continued.

Meanwhile, as originally foreseen, my formal association with PSR ended in mid-August, 1995, after three years. Simultaneously, my grant funding expired. With the end of the long-awaited activism surrounding the NPT Conference and the anniversaries in Japan, this seemed to me a good time to rethink how I could best carry on the effort to which I have been devoted for the last 25 years (and which I expect to occupy the rest of my life). So rather than immediately apply for new grant funding to support the same kinds of work I have been doing in Washington and abroad, I have been reflecting on this question during the fall. And I had reached a conclusion at just about the time your invitation arrived, with what seemed uncanny aptness, to submit an application for Windcall.

I am now committed to spending the next several years primarily to the one activity I feel I have neglected over the last twenty years, among the various contributions I could potentially have made: writing and publishing what I feel I have learned about these problems, and in particular, providing the personal perspective derived from my own experiences and information gained during my earlier government work and in the hectic movement activities since. I plan to start on something like a "movement memoir" immediately. But to remake myself as a committed writer is not going to happen overnight (as many have warned me) and the road ahead will be hard, unfamiliar, and I'm sure, full of frustrations. The chance to concentrate on writing--and the rethinking of a generation of activism and the road ahead--in the setting of Windcall would be the most serendipitously-timed windfall (this can't be the first time you've encountered that pun) I've ever had.